

Touro Synagogue, Congregation
Jeshuat Israel
85 Touro Street opposite Division Street
Newport
Newport County
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-278

HABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
29-

Jewish Synagogue
Touro Street
Newport County
Newport, Rhode Island
in HABS CATALOG (1941)

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Plans and Drawing

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

TOURO SYNAGOGUE
CONGREGATION JESHUAT ISRAELHABS
RI,
3-NEWP,
29-

Location: 85 Touro Street, at the head of Division Street,
Newport, Newport County, Rhode Island

Present Owners
and Occupants: Congregation Jeshuat Israel

Present Use: Orthodox Jewish temple

Statement of
Significance: Touro Synagogue is perhaps Peter Harrison's most
successful building. Although it presents a most
severe facade to the street, the interior treatment,
including carved wooden furnishings and galleries,
is a rich, sophisticated work characteristic of
English and Continental design of the mid-18th
century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1759-1763
2. Architect, builder, contractor: Peter Harrison was the
architect; Joseph Hammond, Jr., house carpenter, was the
builder or contractor.
3. Original and subsequent owners: This building is located
in Plat 24, Lot 25. The following is an incomplete chain
of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city
of Newport. Reference is to volume and page of the Land
Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1759 Deed of June 13, 1759, recorded in LEB. 15, p. 376.

From: Ebenezer Allen and wife Sarah of Sandwich,
Mass.

To: Jacob Rodrigues Rivera, Moses Levy, and Isaac
Hart, Trustees of the Congregation

For: 1500 pounds, old tenor

"... One certain small parcel or lot of land Situate
Lying and Being in the Township of Newport aforesaid,
containing per estimation Ninety two feet in Front or
Breadth and One hundred and six feet in Length or
Depth, the same Being Butted and Bounded as follows

viz., S'ly on a Street called Griffin Street, W'ly on land of Jacob Barney, N'ly on a Street remaining yet to be laid out, E'ly on land now in the possession and improvement of Matthew Cozzens, be the same more or less within said bounds..."

4. Original plans and construction: Ground was broken for the synagogue in 1759. However, plans were known in advance to Ezra Stiles, who showed the configuration of the structure on his map of Newport, 1758.

The following is a description taken from Ezra Stiles' Diary.

December 2, 1763. Friday. In the Afternoon was the dedication of the new Synagogue in this Town. It began by a handsome procession in which were carried the Books of the Law, to be deposited in the Ark. Several Portions of Scripture and of their Service with a Prayer for the Royal Family, were read and finely sung by the priest and People. There were present many Gentlemen and Ladies. The Order and Decorum, the Harmony and Solemnity of the Musick, together with a handsome Assembly of People, in an Edifice the most perfect of the Temple kind perhaps in America and splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the Mind a faint Idea of the Majesty and Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in Scripture.

Dr. Isaac de Abraham Touro performed the Service. The Synagogue is about perhaps fourty foot long and 30 wide, of Brick on a Foundation of Free Stone; it was begun about two years ago, and is now finished except the Porch and the Capitals of the Pillars. The Front representation of the holy of holies, or its Partition Veil, consists only of wainscotted Bréast Work on the East End, in the lower part of which four long Doors cover an upright Square Gloset the depth of which is about a foot or the thickness of the Wall, and in this Apartment (vulgarly called the Ark) were deposited three copies and Rolls of Pentateuch, written on Vellum or rather tanned Calf Skin: one of these Rolls I was told by Dr. Touro was presented from Amsterdam and is Two Hundred years old, the letters have the Rabbinical Flourishes.

A Gallery for the Women runs around the whole Inside, except the East End, supported by Columns of Ionic order, over which are placed correspondent columns of the Corinthian order supporting the Ceiling of the

Roof, the Depth of the Corinthian Pedestal is the height of the Balustrade which runs around the Gallery. The pulpit for Reading of the Law, is a raised Pew with an extended front table; this placed about the center of the Synagogue or nearer the West End being a square embalustraded comparting with the length of the Indented Chancel before and at the Foot of the Ark.

On the middle of the North Side and Affixed to the Wall is a raised Seat for the Parnas or Ruler, and for the Elders; the Breast and Back interlaid with Chinese Mosaic Work. A Wainscotted Seat runs around the Side of the Synagogue below and another in the Gallery. There are no other Seats or Pews. There may be Eighty Souls of Jews or 15 families now in Town. The Synagogue has already cost Fifteen Hundred Pounds Sterling. There are to be five Lamps pendant from a lofty Ceiling.

5. Alterations and additions: By 1827-1829, much repair work had to be completed. The exterior brick walls were painted at this time. On the interior, rotted paneling and crumbling plaster were replaced and painted for the first time. The ark dates from this period. A decorative cornice was removed from the school in the 19th century. It has since been replaced. The basement under the school building to the north has been modernized. A furnace has been installed in an underground vault on the east side of a north-south hall which runs adjacent to the west foundation wall. A program of complete restoration was undertaken between 1957 and 1963, with advisement from the National Park Service.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Touro Synagogue, almost the only public building in Newport to survive the Revolution undamaged, served as the meeting place for the Rhode Island General Assembly and for sessions of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island, 1781-1784. General George Washington attended a Town meeting in the synagogue March 13, 1781. After his election as President, Washington returned to Newport, August 17, 1790. On the occasion of his departure, all clergy and representatives of various organizations presented addresses to the newly elected President. Moses Seixas, the representative of the Congregation, presented his address. In response to this letter, Washington wrote, "... For happily the Government of the United States which gives bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves

as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support..." With the death and emigration of many of the members of the Congregation, the synagogue was used only for special services from the 1820's until it was reopened in 1883. During this time, the Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City, became the trustees of the building and property. Maintenance was made possible by the establishment of the Touro Jewish Synagogue Fund by the will of Abraham Touro, son of the first rabbi. This fund, given to the State of Rhode Island, was administered by the City of Newport. See Acts of the General Assembly of Rhode Island, June, 1823, and Newport Common Council Records, 1822-1883. Another son, Judah Touro, left a further amount to pay a salary for a reader and to maintain the cemetery. See Newport Common Council Book No. 1, pp. 113-117. June 11, 1855.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A sketch of the original ark appears in the margin of Ezra Stiles' Diary, December 2, 1763. Yale University Library. There is an interior photograph of 1872 taken by Rev. Jacques Judah Lyons. American Jewish Historical Society. An engraving of the south facade was published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, August, 1874.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

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b. Secondary and published sources:

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torians, XVII (Summer, 1958), 23-6.

Ware, Isaac. Designs of Inigo Jones and Others.
London, 1735. Pl. 48.

3. Likely sources not yet investigated: Due to the decline in trading in Newport during and after the Revolutionary War, many members of the Congregation left this city. Therefore any other personal accounts relating information on the early history of the structure are not available in Newport.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This synagogue, an American interpretation of the Palladian Revival based on designs from 18th-century architectural books, is a centralized, two-aisled basilica comparable to and perhaps derivative of the Synagogue of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews, Bevis Marks, London, 1700-1701.
2. Condition of fabric: After an extensive restoration program, completed in 1963, this structure is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: About 39 feet by 45 feet with a north wing, 28 feet by 16 feet; rectangular main block; two story.
2. Foundations: The foundations are of slightly dressed brown sandstone which project above the ground level.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The common bond masonry walls are of a soft, red, English brick which was painted a buff color in the mid-19th century. During construction, 196,715 bricks were purchased on August 25, 1760. A brown sandstone belt course is set into the bricks. Two iron S-shaped tie-bar ends are set below the belt course on the east wall. The north wing has a brick belt course.
4. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: The main center entrance is sheltered by a square Ionic columniated portico painted sandstone color with a sanded finish. This portico is set on a square, sandstone pad, four steps in height. A modern wrought-iron railing is placed on the west wall of the building. The women's entrance has a four-step sandstone pad with modern wrought-iron railings.
5. Chimneys: A painted brick interior chimney is centered in the north wall of the north wing.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Four-paneled, double doors open into the synagogue from the portico on the west. The doors are framed by deep boxed timbers with molded edges. A solid wooden fan with a carved sunburst pattern is set above the opening. The portico composition is painted a brown sandstone color with a sanded finish. The women's entrance or the center entrance in the north wing contains an eight-paneled door framed by a finely molded doorway which is topped by a molded triangular pediment with dentils.
 - b. Windows and shutters: All windows in the synagogue are round-headed, double hung, with twelve-over-twelve light sashes topped by a fan of eight lights. On the interior the windows are finished with paneled and louvered shutters. The finely molded exterior frames are painted a sandstone color with a sanded finish. All sills are sandstone. All windows in the school or north wing are double-hung, twelve-over-twelve light sashes. These windows have no exterior

wood frames. All sills are brick. The south bay on the east wall of the school contains two bricked-in windows.

7. Roof: There is a steep, hipped roof on the main portion which is covered with slate shingles. A bold modillion cornice is painted sandstone color with a sanded finish. A less steep, slate-shingled, hipped roof covers the wing to the north. A modillion cornice was replaced in the 19th century by a molded cornice painted with a sanded finish.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The west center entrance doors open into a two-story, rectangular space. Two side aisles skirt the centrally located, raised bema. These aisles terminate at the raised, two-step, rectangular platform on the east wall. The north and south walls are divided into six bays, each marked by a wooden column which supports the gallery. The west wall composition is divided by two gallery-supporting columns which flank the entrance. The three-bay wing to the north, containing the women's entrance, has an open room on the first floor with a stairway located on the south wall. The stairway leads to the gallery entrance on the south wall of the second floor. There is a single room to the north which opens from the second-floor stair hall.
2. Stairways: In the north wing, the open-well stairway leading to the gallery has three landings. The open stringer has step-end scroll work. The three balusters per step are turned and tapered. The ramped hand rail is finely molded. The stairway continues to the modern basement of the wing.
3. Flooring: The synagogue floor has a mauve colored, wall-to-wall carpet. The wing has random-width planked wooden flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are plaster. Wooden architectural details are painted a light gray. The coved ceiling of the synagogue has a rectangular inset panel framed by a carved molding with a running guilloche design. The walls are framed by a cornice with dentils. In the north wing, the plaster walls have a molded cornice. On the first floor, the stairway is set in a bolection paneled wall composition painted a black green. A fireplace opening in the north wall has been plastered. The second-floor room also has a plaster-faced

fireplace in the north wall. This room has a molded, painted chair rail.

5. Doorways and doors: The main entrance, with four-paneled double doors, is framed by a finely molded doorway which is topped by a bracketed cornice with dentils. The cornice frieze is decorated by paired carved swags. The four-paneled doors in the north wing are set in molded doorways.
6. Special decorative features: The gallery, supported by twelve Ionic columns, has twelve corresponding Corinthian columns set on plain pedestals. The balustrade with turned and tapered balusters is topped by a heavy, molded rail. The details of the columns and balustrade were taken from Cibbs' Rules for Drawing and Langley's Treasury of Designs. Peter Harrison owned a copy of Cibbs' book. (See Bridenbaugh, Carl. Peter Harrison. Appendix C.) The bema, or central reading desk, is surrounded by a balustrade with turned and tapered balusters and a heavy, molded rail. A trap door leading to an escape hatch and tunnel to Barney Street is located in the floor of the bema. The ark, an ornately carved cupboard for storage of the Torah, is located in the center of the east wall. The cupboard design seems to have been taken from Langley's Treasury of Designs, plate 108. The upper portion of the ark, containing a canvas painted with the Ten Commandments, is elaborately framed and pedimented. Sources for the design seem to have been two chimney pieces by William Kent, taken from Isaac Ware's Designs of Inigo Jones and Others, plate 48, and Kent's Designs of Inigo Jones, Vol. I, plate 63. This ark may not be the original according to a sketch found in the margin of Ezra Stiles' Diary. (See Schwartz, Esther. "Touro Synagogue Restored, 1827-29.") The painting, according to a bill to the General Assembly of Rhode Island, was done in 1828, by Ben B. Howland. A raised seat for the president and vice president of the Congregation is decorated with strapwork. A lower seat which is set in a wainscot continues around the room from this north wall. Windsor chairs and settees replaced the c. 1900 pews.
7. Hardware: There is no architectural hardware of note. There are, however, two pairs of silver ornaments for the decoration of the scrolls made by Myer Myers, an 18th-century American silversmith.
8. Lighting: Suspended from the center of the ceiling is a twelve-branch candelabrum. Four smaller brass candelabra are suspended from the ceiling corners.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The synagogue is set at an acute angle to the street. This placement enables the Ark of the Covenant, located on the east wall, to face Jerusalem. Touro Street, a busy, narrow street connecting Bellevue Avenue to the commercial area around Washington Square, is lined with residences and other public buildings. The Levi Gale House, now the Jewish Community Center (RI-328), is located directly across the street.
2. Historic landscape design: No plantings surround the building. But to solve the rain drainage problem, a cobblestone border has been set around the entire sandstone base of the building.
3. Enclosures: The property is enclosed by slightly dressed gray granite walls on the east and west boundaries. On the north and south, the property is edged by wrought-iron fences made up of Egyptian Revival flared and capped granite posts, spaced at regular intervals. The narrow pedimented granite gate opens to a walkway leading to the south side of the portico. The gate and fence were designed by Isaiah Rogers in 1842. The total cost was reported to be \$6,835. The Abraham Touro Fund paid for this installation.

On October 19, 1677, Mordecai Campanal and Moses Pacheckoe purchased a plot 30 feet by 40 feet now located at the head of Touro Street, at the intersection of Bellevue Avenue and Kay Street. (See LEB. 3, p. 11.) This property was used for a cemetery. In 1822, Abraham Touro built a brick wall around the plot. In 1841-42, Isaiah Rogers designed a large granite gate and wrought-iron and granite fence in the Egyptian Revival style. The gate posts are decorated with carved, inverted torches. The lintel contains a winged sphere topped by an undecorated pediment. Solomon Willard, a Quincy, Massachusetts, quarry owner, was the mason for both gate complexes and the Touro tomb. In 1858, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," about this plot.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade
Architectural Historian
August 30, 1972

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report is part of a photo-data project initiated in the summer of

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1972, by the Historic American Buildings Survey, John Poppeliers, Chief, in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman, and the Newport Restoration Foundation, Francis R. Comstock, Director. Historical and architectural documentation by Susan R. Slade supplements drawings which were delineated in 1960 and donated to HABS by Gerald R. W. Watland, architect; and photographs taken in 1937 by Arthur LeBoeuf and in 1971 by HABS staff photographer, Jack E. Boucher.